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Cause or Effect?

How Best to Define Trauma

by Daniela Sieff

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[Web log post].

Popular culture tends to define trauma as “being the victim of harm,” and sees trauma as being located in the harmful experiences themselves. But is this the best way to define trauma?

If we are trying to stem the tide of trauma, then we do indeed need to focus on harmful experiences to see how we might prevent them from happening in the future.

However, if our aim is to heal existing trauma, then we’d be wise to stick more closely to the dictionary. The dictionary defines ‘trauma’ as a wound, shock or injury; in so doing, it locates trauma in the *impact* made by negative experiences, rather than in the experiences themselves.

When we suffer overwhelmingly painful or frightening experiences, a damaging imprint is left on our minds and bodies, sending our lives onto a different path. On this path, we live our lives from inside an altered biological and psychological reality. It is entry into this altered reality which best defines trauma.

One reason why it is best to define trauma by its impact, is that the same experience will have different effects on different people. Events which pass virtually un-noticed by one person, might overwhelm another, and leave debilitating emotional wounds. Imagine two bicyclists caught in cross-winds; one may cycle onwards with hardly a wobble, whereas the other might fall and break an arm. The trauma is in the broken arm, not in the cross-wind.

The extent to which we are derailed by an emotional experience will depend on several factors. First, is the intensity of the experience; even Olympic cyclists will struggle to stay upright in a hurricane. Second, is what we, as individuals, bring to the experience; our intrinsic sensitivity, age, previous history, and whether there is anybody to whom we can turn for support. In short, trauma occurs at the interface where negative experiences meet *unique* human beings.

An equally important reason for defining trauma by its impact, is that it put us in a better position to engage with the healing process.

If we follow popular culture, and locate trauma in the original harmful experiences, our attention is focused on those experiences, and on the people who were responsible for them.

At the start of a healing journey this is not a problem. We need to uncover the cause of our suffering. We also need to become aware of who was responsible, if only to understand that it was not our fault. We have to return to the historic roots of our wounds in order to come forward into the present

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with greater feeling, self-compassion and clarity.

However, there comes a time in all healing journeys when we must widen our focus beyond the wounding experiences and look at the bigger picture; otherwise we become chained to our traumatizing past and consumed by our identity as victim. This is the antithesis of healing.

Thinking that we can heal trauma by focusing narrowly on the wounding experiences is akin to having our leg broken when a drunken driver crashes into us, and thinking the break will heal if we focus on the accident and on jailing the driver. There is value in knowing how our leg was broken. There is satisfaction in seeing the driver punished. But neither will heal our leg. To heal our leg, we must first address the break, and then we must build up the physical strength and flexibility which will enable us to walk again.

Similarly, to heal our broken psyches, we must work directly with our emotional wounds, and we must build up the emotional resources that will enable us to make our way out of the altered reality in which we are living.

To do this, we need help from somebody who has been through this process themselves, and who knows it from the inside out.

We also need to realize that ultimately our lives have been derailed by the reactions constellated *inside* our minds and bodies in response to the original harmful experiences, rather than by the experiences themselves.

This is not a comfortable realization; what it demands of us is daunting. It takes courage and compassion to recognize that although we are not responsible for the events that damaged us, we must take responsibility for repairing their impact. It takes grit and patience to engage with our biological and psychological reactions. It takes perseverance and hope to pursue the kind of therapeutic process which can help us develop healthier ways of being.

It is all too tempting to look for an apparently easier route. However, there is no easier route. Unless we commit ourselves to this deep inner work, we will not move beyond the altered reality which constitutes our emotional wounding. Defining trauma by its impact helps to guide and inspire us as we live this commitment.

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Daniela F. Sieff, D.Phil., is a scholar, writer and speaker. She has a PhD in biological anthropology from the University of Oxford, and an active interest in the dynamics of the human psyche. The question that engages her is: ‘What makes us who we are?’ She has been drawn to thinking about this question in interdisciplinary ways. Her doctoral work explored how evolutionary processes contribute to shaping human behavior. Her research took her to a wilderness region of Tanzania to live with a traditional cattle-

herding people. In recent years Daniela has explored emotional trauma and healing through bringing together her own personal experience, with knowledge that comes from depth psychology, neurobiology, anthropology and evolution. Out of this work emerged her recently published book: *Understanding and Healing Emotional Trauma: Conversations with Pioneering Clinicians and Researchers* (Routledge 2015).

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